

PEER REVIEW HISTORY

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ARTICLE DETAILS

TITLE (PROVISIONAL)	Depression, Anxiety, and Quality of Life of Afghan Women Living in Urban Areas Under the Taliban Government: A cross-sectional study
AUTHORS	Neyazi, Ahmad; Padhi, Bijaya; Mohammadi, Ab. Qadim; Ahmadi, Mahsa; Erfan, Adiba; Bashiri, Bahara; Neyazi, Mehrab; Ishaqzada, Marjina; Noormohammadi, Morteza; Griffiths, Mark

VERSION 1 – REVIEW

REVIEWER	Rubenstein, Leonard Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health
REVIEW RETURNED	05-Feb-2023

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>This is a very important subject, and a courageous and no doubt difficult study. The paper can make a contribution to understanding if certain clarifications and revisions are made.</p> <p>Context and prior research</p> <p>1. it would be helpful to provide more context, both about the history of denial of women social and economic opportunities and freedoms, subjugation to men within families, and now renewed restrictions. The paper could describe that context, including the restrictions the Taliban imposed on women in the period up to and including the time the survey was conducted. Additionally, the paper could recognize the catastrophic economic, food and health crisis that immediately followed the Taliban takeover in 2021, as the retreat of international donors and increased sanctions led to the collapse of the economy, enormous unemployment, and food insecurity and malnutrition.</p> <p>2. While there is not a lot of prior research on mental health among Afghan women, but there is some covering both the time before the initial rule of the Taliban ended in 2001 and the period from 2001 to 2021. A full literature review should be conducted so that some comparisons can be made. It would be helpful to review reports of UN agencies and NGOS about mental health among women, even if not in peer-reviewed journals. Also, reference in last sentence of the conclusion, referring to the 2009 study, should be reference 43, not 44.</p> <p>The study</p> <p>1. The study could be more accurately described and data reanalyzed to reflect that the respondents are a unique and limited cohort, not representative of all Afghan women. Almost 95% of respondents live in urban areas, whereas (according to the World Bank) 75% of people in Afghanistan live in rural areas. Similarly,</p>
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	<p>the sample included only about 19% of women who are illiterate, whereas more than 75% of women and girls nationwide are not literate. The same goes for education, as more than 70% of the sample completed high school and almost 50% attended university, whereas only a tiny percentage of women in Afghanistan has these levels of education. Accordingly, it would be helpful a) to describe the study as among urban, educated women and b) reanalyze the data and described the study as about urban women to focus. This could be described in the limitations as well as not representing all Afghan women. The limitations could also state that it is difficult to determine whether the results were a snapshot in a particularly fraught time.</p> <p>2. There is another reason for taking this approach. People living in urban areas were, until August 2021, mostly protected from control by the Taliban. During that time, rural women were more likely to be living in areas controlled by the Taliban, or at least where their presence was felt. Their experiences in the period after August 2021 were thus likely to be far different than those of urban women. Reanalyzing the data would provide a better picture of the prevalence of anxiety and depression for the vast majority of the respondents.</p> <p>3. It is important to understand both to clarify two terms and state how they were explained to respondents.</p> <p>a. Definition of trauma. Did it include the Taliban takeover itself and the economic, social and political crisis that followed?</p> <p>b. It would be helpful to know whether income refers to individual income or household income.</p> <p>4. The reference to the prior study (reference 43) does not quite support the implication at the end of the discussion of a major difference in depression and anxiety from the time of that study to this one. That study was conducted only in Kandahar and almost 60% of the women had no education, almost all were married.</p>
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REVIEWER	Mousavi, Sayed Hamid Afghan University Faculty of Medicine
REVIEW RETURNED	11-Feb-2023

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>1. This study examines the prevalence of depression, anxiety and quality of life in women. The fact that this is one of very few studies from this area makes it an important study.</p> <p>Title</p> <p>Introduction</p> <p>2. It is written well. However, it would be better to add some paragraphs on effects of COVID-19 as well.</p> <p>Methods</p> <p>3. Needs revision. Please provide more details on how was sample selected and the sampling technique.</p> <p>4. Instruments: The use of validated scales/questionnaires makes this study strong.</p> <p>Results</p> <p>5. Table 1 is helpful but check whether 'illiterate' is correct - looks like it should be 'no education';</p> <p>Discussion</p>
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	6. Overall, it is written well. It is better to compare findings of this study with studies related to COVID-19's impacts on mental health.
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VERSION 1 – AUTHOR RESPONSE

Responses to Reviewer 1

Reviewer's comment: This is a very important subject, and a courageous and no doubt difficult study. The paper can make a contribution to understanding if certain clarifications and revisions are made.

Author's response: Thank you for the positive feedback and helpful comments which have helped to strengthen the paper.

Reviewer's comment: It would be helpful to provide more context, both about the history of denial of women social and economic opportunities and freedoms, subjugation to men within families, and now renewed restrictions.

Author's response: We have now added a new paragraph in the revised Introduction as follows (plus additional text relating to the Afghan context in response to the next comment):

"Women continue to face many obstacles and challenges in their pursuit of equality. In many parts of the world, women are still denied basic rights and freedoms, including the right to education, the right to work, and the right to vote, as well as subjugation to men within family settings. Even in more progressive societies, women continue to face discrimination and inequality in the workplace, in politics, and in their personal lives [12]."

Reviewer's comment: The paper could describe that context, including the restrictions the Taliban imposed on women in the period up to and including the time the survey was conducted. Additionally, the paper could recognize the catastrophic economic, food and health crisis that immediately followed the Taliban takeover in 2021, as the retreat of international donors and increased sanctions led to the collapse of the economy, enormous unemployment, and food insecurity and malnutrition.

Author's response: We have now added a new paragraph in the revised Introduction:

"When the Taliban government took over in 2021, the country faced an economic, food, and health crisis. The retreat of international donors and increased sanctions by the international community led to the collapse of the economy, high unemployment, food insecurity, and malnutrition. Moreover, under the Taliban government, women have been marginalized. Moreover, with more than half of Afghanistan's population now living below the poverty line, the situation is even worse for girls and women [13]. Under the Taliban government, women are limited in education, employment, mobility, political participation, healthcare, and public presence [14]. These conditions can exacerbate already existing mental health disorders among women."

Reviewer's comment: While there is not a lot of prior research on mental health among Afghan women, but there is some covering both the time before the initial rule of the Taliban ended in 2001 and the period from 2001 to 2021. A full literature review should be conducted so that some comparisons can be made. It would be helpful to review reports of UN agencies and NGOS about mental health among women, even if not in peer-reviewed journals.

Author's response: We have now added the following to the revised Introduction:

"Based on a report by the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, in post-Taliban era in 2002, the prevalence of depression was reported to be 73% among Afghan women. This report also noted

that 86% of women had significant anxiety symptoms [33]. Another study conducted in 2021 shows that 79.1% of Afghan women were depressed before the fall of the government to the Taliban [34]"

Reviewer's comment: Also, reference in last sentence of the conclusion, referring to the 2009 study, should be reference 43, not 44.

Author's response: Thank you for your helpful comment. We have now changed it as follows:

"(i.e., nine-tenths of the total sample reported symptoms of depression or anxiety) [56]."

Reviewer's comment: The study could be more accurately described and data reanalyzed to reflect that the respondents are a unique and limited cohort, not representative of all Afghan women. Almost 95% of respondents live in urban areas, whereas (according to the World Bank) 75% of people in Afghanistan live in rural areas. Similarly, the sample included only about 19% of women who are illiterate, whereas more than 75% of women and girls nationwide are not literate. The same goes for education, as more than 70% of the sample completed high school and almost 50% attended university, whereas only a tiny percentage of women in Afghanistan has these levels of education.

Author's response: Thank you for your helpful comment. The paper never claimed that the sample was representative. This has now been acknowledged in the revised limitations.

"...Another limitation of this study was that the sample is not representative of all Afghan women. The sample only contained participants from urban areas and the sample had a much greater proportion of educated women than found nationally, and as a consequence a much smaller proportion of illiterate participants than that found nationally.

Reviewer's comment: Accordingly, it would be helpful a) to describe the study as among urban, educated women

Author's response: Many thanks for your comment. As you will see from our response to a comment below, we have now removed the small number of participants that lived in rural areas. This means that all of the participants in the re-analyzed data were from urban areas. We have now changed the wording to reflect this throughout the manuscript including the title of the manuscript:

"Depression, Anxiety, and Quality of Life of Afghan Women Living in Urban Areas Under the Taliban Government: A cross-sectional study" (revised paper title).

"...and the socio-demographic characteristics of Afghan women living in urban areas under the rule of Taliban government in Afghanistan" (revised in the Abstract).

"...with QoL, and the socio-demographic characteristics of Afghan women living under the rule of Taliban in urban areas" (revised at the end of the Introduction)

Reviewer's comment: Reanalyze the data and described the study as about urban women to focus.

Author's response: Thank you for the helpful comment. We have now reanalyzed the data and excluded the participants from rural areas given there were so few of them in the sample. We have updated all of the tables and the Results section.

Reviewer's comment: This could be described in the limitations as well as not representing all Afghan women. The limitations could also state that it is difficult to determine whether the results were a snapshot in a particularly fraught time.

Author's response: Many thanks for your constructive comment. We have now added this to the limitations:

"...Another limitation of this study was that the sample is not representative of all Afghan women. The sample only contained participants from urban areas and the sample had a much greater proportion of educated women than found nationally, and as a consequence a much smaller proportion of

illiterate participants than that found nationally. Moreover, it is difficult to determine whether the results are indicative of a snapshot in a particularly fraught time in Afghanistan.”

Reviewer’s comment: There is another reason for taking this approach. People living in urban areas were, until August 2021, mostly protected from control by the Taliban. During that time, rural women were more likely to be living in areas controlled by the Taliban, or at least where their presence was felt. Their experiences in the period after August 2021 were thus likely to be far different than those of urban women. Reanalyzing the data would provide a better picture of the prevalence of anxiety and depression for the vast majority of the respondents.

Author’s response: As noted in previous responses, we have reanalyzed the data by removing those participants who lived in urban areas.

Reviewer’s comment: It is important to understand both to clarify two terms and state how they were explained to respondents.

a. Definition of trauma. Did it include the Taliban takeover itself and the economic, social and political crisis that followed?

b. It would be helpful to know whether income refers to individual income or household income.

Author’s response: Thank you the questions.

a. The word ‘trauma’ was not used in the actual question to participants. They were simply asked if they had “experienced a bad event in the past month”. Therefore, this did not refer to the Taliban takeover. We have now replaced the word ‘trauma’ with ‘bad event’ in the revised manuscript.

b. It represented the family income and we have changed it as follows and this has now been clarified in the revised manuscript to “monthly household income”.

Reviewer’s comment: The reference to the prior study (reference 43) does not quite support the implication at the end of the discussion of a major difference in depression and anxiety from the time of that study to this one. That study was conducted only in Kandahar and almost 60% of the women had no education, almost all were married.

Author’s response: Thank you for your comment. We have now added another study that covered other provinces as follows:

“Another study conducted in 2021 shows that 79.1% of Afghan women were depressed before the fall of the government to the Taliban [34]”

Responses to Reviewer 2

Reviewer’s comment: This study examines the prevalence of depression, anxiety and quality of life in women. The fact that this is one of very few studies from this area makes it an important study.

Author’s response: Thank you for the positive feedback and helpful comments which have helped to strengthen the paper.

Reviewer’s comment: It is written well. However, it would be better to add a paragraph on effects of COVID-19 as well.

Author’s response: We have now added a paragraph on the effects COVID-19 as follows:

“Along with other factors, COVID-19 is likely to have had a negative impact on women’s mental health. With many schools and daycare centers closed, women had to take on additional responsibilities such as caring for children and/or elderly family members, often while trying to work from home. This increased workload can lead to feelings of exhaustion, frustration, and burnout, all of which can take a toll on mental health [15].”

Reviewer’s comment: The use of validated scales/questionnaires makes this study strong.

Author's response: Thank you for your positive feedback.

Reviewer's comment: Table 1 is helpful but check whether 'illiterate' is correct - looks like it should be 'no education';

Author's response: Thank you for your comment. It is "illiterate" not "no education". This is why all participants were interviewed face-to-face (because some individuals are illiterate).

VERSION 2 – REVIEW

REVIEWER	Rubenstein, Leonard Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health
REVIEW RETURNED	05-Apr-2023

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>The authors have done an excellent job in responding to comments and strengthening the paper, particularly by being explicit that it is about urban women and reanalyzing the data to exclude the few rural women. Congratulations. I have just a few very minor suggestions for the final editing.</p> <p>The new paragraph on background on Afghanistan could be better placed, as it is now in the middle of a general discussion of depression and anxiety. It might better be placed after the near the end of the introduction where the authors review the situation in Afghanistan.</p> <p>It would be worth noting in the participants' section that the recruitment was mostly in urban areas, and that the number (438) excludes the few women who were recruited from non-urban areas.</p> <p>The authors addressed my comment on trauma by using the exact language --"bad event" -- from the instrument. Because the phrase "bad event" may not be clear to readers, it would be worth a sentence to explain that the phrase was based on the question asked, which allowed the respondents to decide how they interpreted what counted as a "bad event."</p> <p>In the discussion, it would help to refer to urban women in the first sentence to reinforce the scope of the study and also to provide some interpretation (if the authors' know) of how the respondents understood "bad event."</p> <p>There are some minor grammatical errors in strengths and limitations section at the beginning and a missing reference to Afghanistan when the Taliban first mentioned (it may seem obvious, but nonetheless helpful as there are Taliban in Pakistan).</p>
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REVIEWER	Mousavi, Sayed Hamid Afghan University Faculty of Medicine
REVIEW RETURNED	09-Apr-2023

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>1. This study examines the prevalence of depression, anxiety and quality of life in women. The fact that this is one of very few studies from this area makes it an important study.</p> <p>Title</p>
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	<p>Introduction</p> <p>2. It is written well. However, it would be better to add some paragraphs on effects of COVID-19 as well.</p> <p>Methods</p> <p>3. Needs revision. Please provide more details on how was sample selected and the sampling technique.</p> <p>4. Instruments: The use of validated scales/questionnaires makes this study strong.</p> <p>Results</p> <p>5. Table 1 is helpful but check whether 'illiterate' is correct - looks like it should be 'no education';</p> <p>Discussion</p> <p>6. Overall, it is written well. It is better to compare findings of this study with studies related to COVID-19's impacts on mental health.</p>
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VERSION 2 – AUTHOR RESPONSE

Responses to Reviewer 1

Reviewer's comment: The authors have done an excellent job in responding to comments and strengthening the paper, particularly by being explicit that it is about urban women and reanalyzing the data to exclude the few rural women. Congratulations. I have just a few very minor suggestions for the final editing.

Author's response: Thank you for the positive feedback and helpful comments which have helped to strengthen the paper further.

Reviewer's comment: The new paragraph on background on Afghanistan could be better placed, as it is now in the middle of a general discussion of depression and anxiety. It might better be placed after the near the end of the introduction where the authors review the situation in Afghanistan.

Author's response: We have now moved the paragraph nearer to the end of the Introduction.

Reviewer's comment: It would be worth noting in the participants' section that the recruitment was mostly in urban areas, and that the number (438) excludes the few women who were recruited from non-urban areas.

Author's response: We have now added that the data was recruited from urban areas of Afghanistan as follows:

"...were recruited across urban-areas of major provinces (Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, and Samangan) of Afghanistan."

Reviewer's comment: The authors addressed my comment on trauma by using the exact language -- "bad event" -- from the instrument. Because the phrase "bad event" may not be clear to readers, it would be worth a sentence to explain that the phrase was based on the question asked, which allowed the respondents to decide how they interpreted what counted as a "bad event."

Author's response: We have added a description in the methods section as follows:

"...whether experienced a bad event in the past month (i.e., any action or event that happened during the past month which caused the participant to feel down or depressed. This was left up to the participants to interpret what the bad event was)."

Reviewer's comment: In the discussion, it would help to refer to urban women in the first sentence to reinforce the scope of the study"

Author's response: We have now changed it as follows:

"...Afghan women in urban areas..."

Reviewer's comment: Also to provide some interpretation (if the authors know) of how the respondents understood "bad event".

Author's response: This has now been clarified in the Methods section as follows:

"...(i.e., any action or event that happened during the past month which caused the participant to feel down or depressed. This was left up to the participants to interpret what the bad event was)."

Reviewer's comment: There are some minor grammatical errors in strengths and limitations section at the beginning and a missing reference to Afghanistan when the Taliban first mentioned (it may seem obvious, but nonetheless helpful as there are Taliban in Pakistan).

Author's response: Many thanks for your comment. In the revised manuscript, we have corrected the grammatical errors in 'Limitations' section as follows and added that the Taliban referred to the Taliban in Afghanistan:

"Another limitation is that it did not assess the date of onset of mental health symptoms or poor QoL. Therefore, it is not known whether the participants' mental health condition changed since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan or had preceded it."

Responses to Reviewer 2

Reviewer's comment: This study examines the prevalence of depression, anxiety and quality of life in women. The fact that this is one of very few studies from this area makes it an important study.

Author's response: Thank you for the positive feedback and helpful comments which have helped to strengthen the paper.

Reviewer's comment: It is written well. However, it would be better to add a paragraph on effects of COVID-19 as well.

Author's response: We have now added a paragraph on the effects COVID-19 as follows:

"Along with other factors, COVID-19 is likely to have had a negative impact on women's mental health. With many schools and daycare centers closed, women had to take on additional responsibilities such as caring for children and/or elderly family members, often while trying to work from home. This increased workload can lead to feelings of exhaustion, frustration, and burnout, all of which can take a toll on mental health [34]."

Reviewer's comment: The use of validated scales/questionnaires makes this study strong.

Author's response: Thank you for your positive feedback.

Reviewer's comment: Table 1 is helpful but check whether 'illiterate' is correct - looks like it should be 'no education';

Author's response: Thank you for your comment. It is "illiterate" not "no education". This is why all participants were interviewed face-to-face (because some of the participants were illiterate).

VERSION 3 – REVIEW

REVIEWER	Rubenstein, Leonard Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health
REVIEW RETURNED	23-Apr-2023
GENERAL COMMENTS	The authors have conscientiously and fully addressed all concerns raised, and the paper will be a valuable contribution to understanding mental health concerns among urban women in Afghanistan.
REVIEWER	Mousavi, Sayed Hamid Afghan University Faculty of Medicine
REVIEW RETURNED	21-Apr-2023
GENERAL COMMENTS	All comments were sufficiently addressed in the current revision.